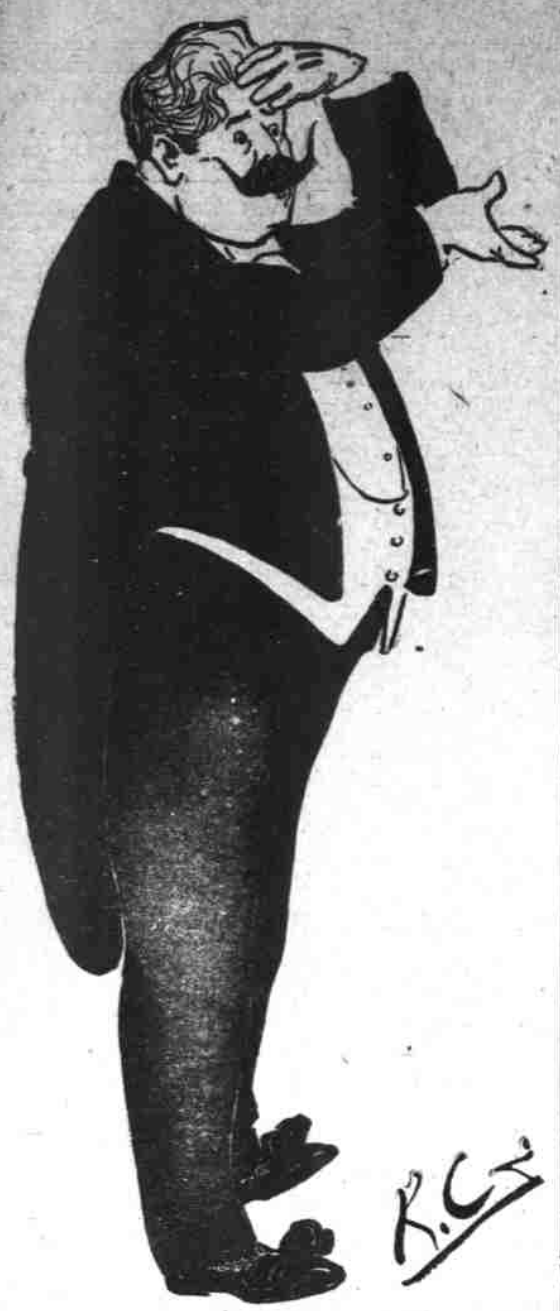
Kate Carew Raids Music Hall on Trail of Leoncavallo, the Composer

Interviewer Finds the Rotund Maker of "Pagliacci" Sandwiched Between Ragtime and Trapeze Acts at the London Hippodrome, and Hears from Him of His Favorite Modern Music—His Own—and Also of His Admiration for the "American Voice" —A Word About His Forthcoming Opera.



"RAGTIME!—IT IS NOT MUSIC—IT IS MERELY A VIOLENT NOISE."

By KATE CAREW.

THIS was the sign in large electric lights over the theatre—the London Hippodrome, to be precise—which lured me to a lively linguistic combat:

ZINGARI!!!
New Grand Opera
Composed and conducted personally by
LEONCAVALLO
American Rag Time AND
LEONE
in her great Trapeze Act.

Around the corner, at the Colleeum, another sign glared into the night: SARAH BERNHARDT: THE TRAINED SEALS: and THE FLICKERGRAPH: and, further on, SIR HERBERT BEERBOHM TREE.

Oh, Art! Illusive spectre, where art thou at?

Thus I pondered, standing outside the theatre, nobly mackintoshed, umbrellered and galoshed to keep out the rain. Rain and fog are purely British institutions—we only think it rains on Broadway; they know it rains over here. Personally I prefer an impressionistic and poetic fog. One can be anything in a fog (even journalism assumes mystic proportions), and one does feel so whimsically WHISTLERIAN (say that fast if you can, my dears). Now, where was I? These fogs are so confusing! I'm always losing myself in them. Oh, yes! There was I a-standing and a-dreaming of the unreality of fogs—I mean of life—and trying to reconcile my old-fashioned ideas of Art and the time-honored environment of the Artist to the present epidemic of Great Ones now raging in the London music halls.

So gathering my raincoat and my courage about me, I decided then and there to board the great Leoncavallo in his den, and find out WHY the composer of the immortal "Pagliacci" should be reduced to sandwiching in a première production of a new grand opera between a Rag Time Act and a lady of the ballet. Scurrying to the stage door, I tried to pry my way through an excitable throng of men and women of all nations, into the presence of the stage door keeper.

GAINED FIVE YARDS WITH HER.

My dears, I blush to tell it, but if a cute, little, obliging acrobat hadn't mistaken your dignified Auntie for Leone—the Lady of the Trapeze—playfully lifted me quite off my feet, and tidily planked me down inside the door, I'd still be wedging my way in. 'Twas a most startling and embarrassing entrance. Goodness knows what that doorkeeper—that supercilious custodian of dressing-room inmates and morals—thought as he bent his bristling brow "me-wards." Meekly I asked if he would send my name to Signor Leoncavallo, timidly stating that I had an appointment with the Maestro.

"Write your nime," grunted His Mightiness, with a contemptuous sniff, and he shoved a pencil toward me with a look that showed he could have killed me for my temerity. When I pushed my modest calligraphy over the counter, he growled:

"Full nime?"

"As full as I can make it," I answered desperately.

"Miss or Marm," he muttered.

"Miss," I stammered apologetically, and clung to the railing for support.

"Huh—" he grumbled suspiciously, "th' 'er alone to twenty-hight," and another equally terrifying person clutched me by the arm. I was about to shriek for help, picturing the mysterious labyrinth toward which I was being rapidly perambulated as a sort of lethal chamber for the slow extinguishing of all the Aunt Kates of the world. I frantically went over my virginal sins, with grim visions of Edgar Allan Poe's story of the Inquisition plucking at my agonized memory—when plunk! right into a smiling and pleasant-voiced Italian we bumped—and with a sigh of relief I collected my scattered wits and prepared to cull the thoughts of the great Leoncavallo.

RIGHT INTO THE PRESENCE.

The smiling Italian proved to be a secretary-interpreter sort of person who assured me that in one "momenta" Signor Leoncavallo would receive me—then a deep, resonant voice thundered from the room beyond. "Entrate!" which means "Come in." And your trembling little relative was ushered into the presence of the great Maestro.

Signor Leoncavallo sat in state, entirely surrounded by himself.

Signor Leoncavallo is a famous composer, that is agreed—he is incidentally a retired composer—nay more—Signor Leoncavallo is a fat—a very fat—composer. As the preliminary introductions were being accomplished I took a furtive bird's-eye view of the celebrated musician and found that his most fascinating feature was a tangled silvered mass of silky hair, which rippled in superabundance from a brow of peculiar narrowness and height. His small, bright eyes, set rather close together, were hazel in hue and possessed all the innocent candor of a child. There was nothing illusive or esthetic in his personality. He sat placidly smiling a benignant welcome at me whilst he waved a pudgy hand in the direction of a neighboring chair. Just then, to my dismay, the interpreter-secretary began bowing himself discreetly away.

"Oh, don't go," I exclaimed, mentally catching the hapless gentleman by his flying coattails as he was about to disappear through the door. "I can't be left alone with this seething mass of Italian verbosity. It isn't fair."

HAD ONE ANGLO-SAXON PHRASE.

You see the Maestro by this time was pleasantly prattling to your Auntie in a language which sounded something like Mass on a Sunday morning, but all it conveyed to my unhappy ears was "Mio musica grandioso! mio musica splendido, mio musica magnificono, bombasta, dambidetica, rattistico. How do you do?" That was the one phrase in English with which he was evidently familiar.

I visibly shrank under this volley.

"Parlar Italiano?" suddenly asked the great Maestro excitably, interrupting himself in his panegyrics on his own music.

"Do you speak Italian?" repeated the interpreter, raising his voice and arms louder and higher than his master's.

"No," I confided apologetically, and, barricading myself behind my sketch-book, I awaited the next attack from the enemy. There was a cessation in verbal hostilities for a moment, and to relieve the tension I plucked up courage to inquire of the interpreter:

"What do you—I mean, what does the Maestro—consider the main essentials necessary to make the successful composer of serious music nowadays?"

"Ah, ha"—a Machiavellian question that—for Leon promptly launched forth in a bombastic tirade which sounded like an anatomical treatise or something of the sort.

"Brains!" he thundered, pounding his massive brow in a manner by no means gentle. "Heart," he continued, pummelling the place where his heart should have been. "Those are what make the great composer."

"And money?" I interrupted, meekly, thinking of all the Paquin frocks I could buy with the one week's salary drawn by the great Maestro, for "personally composing and conducting" his grand operas in a music hall. He waved that aside as a minor matter, too unimportant for discussion.

"Money is good for some, no doubt," he rumbled, on second thought, "a little money is sometimes necessary—but for the genius!" he exclaimed, "it exists not. Real art is above the lure of gold—it does not depend upon the standards set by a superficial and ignorant society. As I said before, it is a matter of brains and heart." He again thumped himself upon the left side of his now agitated person, but not so hard as before.

"Don't hurt yourself," I warned, sympathetically.

AN UNAPPRECIATED WARNING.

"Che cosa ce?" snapped the mighty Leon, which means, "What do you say?"—and hurriedly pocketing my altruistic sympathies for his bodily welfare I continued my questions.

"Would you mind explaining how much heart and how much intellect are required in conjunction to produce the great composer?" I ventured, for not possessing a sound musical education myself and having once been told by a musical zealot friend of mine that music was the least brainy of arts on account of its emotional appeal—for in the creation of harmonies one need not necessarily linger within any given intellectual radius for inspiration—I was naturally curious to see how closely my friend's views coincided with Leoncavallo's recipe for greatness. Personally, I can read a book or look at a picture, and so can you, my dears, and experience the highest mental pleasure, but when one hears the band strike up "Dixie Land" or Chopin's "Funeral March" one could just laugh or weep; at least that's how your Aunt Kate feels about it.

I explained all this to the Maestro through his human gramophone, much to his interest, though my horror grew as I realized the apparent rudeness of the observation. However, he took it all quite good naturedly, and I breathed again.

"I think the heart is a most important item," volunteered His Composership, "for feeling is the greatest propelling power toward the working out of a musical idea, tempered, of course, by technique and art. Now, I am not considered a good conductor; few composers are; that is, in conducting their own works. For my own part, I am so anxious to get it over that I fear I am apt to hasten the tempo sometimes when it should be retarded, simply in my nervous anxiety to anticipate the last bar. Yes, it is FEELING, tempered by technique and art," he murmured mustngly.

"Which is Elimination and Selection," I gurgled glibly, thinking it rather a neat definition of the Inexorable Muse.

The retort passed unnoticed. Signor Leoncavallo went on rather touchingly. "After all, who is the greater—the creator or the interpreter? (The secretary-person preened himself at these words.) WHICH is the greater artist? When I hear my Ridi Pagliacci (Canio's Lament) rendered as Caruso once was capable of rendering it—was I not then only the means, and the singer the whole?—for what does the crowd care about la Pauvera Piccolo Compositore!"

That, my children, means "the poor little composer." I gazed in awe at this mammoth child of genius, and Bobby Burns's

"Oh, wad some power the giftie gie us
To see ourseis as ithers see us"

flashed into my mind.

NEVIN, M'DOWELL AND HERBERT

"And what do you think of American music?" I interjected, hastily; "our SERIOUS music, Nevin, MacDowell and er-er-er, Victor Herbert?" I wildly searched the Carew memory in a vain effort to cudgel up other recruits to our musical forces, but, alas! Then I remembered that Arthur Nevin wrote a grand opera called "Twilight," which was ruled off the operatic turf because of its esthetic unmorality, or something of that sort, and Victor Herbert's "Natoma," in which Mary Garden sang—"Surely that's a beginning for better things?" I asked.

"Ah, Nevin," smiled Leoncavallo; "he was hardly serious; graceful, yes, even melodious, but surely he was not an orchestral writer, as I remember. Now, I like your MacDowell best—for the piano he was excellent. I recollect well a concerto—troppo musicale—si—si"—

"And Victor Herbert?" I wedged in, determinedly.

The Maestro's smile vanished in a flash.

"Va!—a writer of operettes—he"—

"Ah, but your 'Reginetta delle Rose?'" I exclaimed, accusingly, "your new comic opera—now running in Milan—hasn't it a flower girl and a hero king incognito, who is a tenor, and (this as a crowning triumph) the waltz—the inevitable Merry-Widow-Dollar-Princess - Come-to-the-Ball Viennese Waltz?"

Signor Leoncavallo grinned. Yes, dears, he grinned and owned up, waxing rather proud as the secretary interpreter expatiated upon its popularity and the amount of royalties pouring into the Leoncavallo coffers.

"I wrote it as a joke," explained the composer, "nothing more; only you must understand that the delicate art of opera bouffe is quite lost in Anglo-Saxon countries. After all, a light and pleasing comedy, a pretty girl, an ardent lover and a melody one can hum—Ah!" He flourished his arms rapturously, growing positively sentimental, as he started to hum his waltz to me. Girls, can you imagine a hippo warbling a passionate love ditty.

I tried to assume a rapt expression, but 'twas no use. It was too funny and too frightening for words. I longed to hide behind the piano, but I could only cling to my chair and lower my embarrassed eyes, waiting for the storm to blow over.

"But," I weakly queried at last, "what about the greatest asset of the modern stage, the comedian?"

"Mio dio!" shouted Leoncavallo savagely, "there is one thing we will not allow in Italy, that is your red nosed comedy lunatic, who slips on the peel of the banana and sits down on the stage very hard in consequence." This is a literal translation of the great maestro's thought, I assure you. "He we accept not—for us he does not exist."

I WAITED FOR THE STORM TO BLOW OVER.

"And what do you think of the American voice?" I asked.

"I admire it greatly," he answered enthusiastically. "The American singer is rapidly coming to the front. It is because, I think, the Americans are such an intelligent race. They learn quickly, and they retain what is taught them. And the Americans are a critical nation; they have always imported to their shores the greatest artists in the world; so they set a standard for the budding American singer that is the highest to attain. I knew Sibyl Sanderson before her debut in Paris, and I often encouraged her in her hours of depression. There was a rare artist," he murmured, regretfully.

"And what—what do you think of Ragtime?" I demanded briskly, warming to my task.

"Ragtime!" sighed the Maestro, and his bright little eyes surveyed me sadly, not without reproof, while his voice expressed the mild contempt he dared not otherwise expose owing to his native politeness.

"It is not music at all—it is—it is—merely a violent noise; but, of course, it is compatible with all the instincts of your race—for you have violent pleasures, do you not? Your 'chute the chutes,' for instance; no one but an American would have invented that. Alas! It has even invaded Italy. No, 'Ragtime' as the expression of certain characteristics of a nation may perhaps be interesting to the student of psychological development of a people—but music it is not."

And then, resuming with accumulating intensity: "Take, Madame, the beautiful folk songs of my country, or even of the Celtic races—the longing, the melancholy, the despair—it is of these qualities music should be colored. Now, where is the pain or the passion in your Ragtime?" He turned on me so fiercely with this final shaft of disapproval that I felt in danger of being "pouffed" into space along with the departed Mr. Massenet and his music. But I held tight and persisted.

TOILERS FOR PLEASURE.

"But, Mr. Leoncavallo, you forget one of Ragtime's ingredients is a good laugh or two. Don't you think that is a tonic for the weary?"

The Maestro pondered for a moment, then his features relaxed into the most tolerant, the most childlike of smiles. "Ah, you Americans—how hard you work to make yourselves gay—happy!"

I felt I must get back to music, else our relations would become strained, so I asked hastily: "Were you a great student of Bach?" remembering that that is the conventional thing to say.

"Not so much as of Corelli and Scarlatti, the earlier masters," answered His Composership.

"And Beethoven and Wagner," I began, "do you"—

Leoncavallo fairly snapped the names from my lips. "The greatest! the greatest!" he exclaimed, and his secretary's arms began to revolve again. "Wagner, a universal genius, and Beethoven," the Maestro's voice dropped to a reverential whisper. "He was the giant music builder of them all. He will live on when we all are no more," he murmured sadly.

WORKING ON NEW GRAND OPERA

"What are your working hours?" I inquired irrelevantly, thinking I should hate to see Leoncavallo in tears.

"Oh, I have no set time for work," he explained. "It depends where I am and my environment. At present I am engaged on a new grand opera, and I practically work in all my spare time."

"And the name of that?"

"I am not at liberty to tell," replied Leoncavallo, reprovingly. "The world will know soon enough."

"And when do you go to my land again?"

"Ah, I hope to go to the land of—le vita déjeuner' (quick lunch) next April," said he, playfully, and added: "If all goes well with my work in this country, I shall take flogare there—and perhaps"— The composer's eyes twinkled.

"The new opera? I exclaimed, knowingly.

"No, no," he hastened to correct me; "only a wife," he explained, plaintively.

"Oh!" I chirped, with polite sympathy. "How charming!" I felt the obvious thing to do was to extend then and there a welcome to my fatherland in my best drawing room manner, and, fearing the interview was verging on the domestic, I asked:

"And of the modern composers—whose music would you rather listen to?"

"To my own," he admitted without hesitation. "I must say that it gives me much pleasure to hear my own works on the orchestra."

TIME FOR HIS TURN.

I felt myself growing more and more attached to this child of combined egoism and simplicity, and I think perhaps your Aunt Kate might have reached the confiding stage, when buzz went the bell, and the callboy yelled outside the door, "Leoncavallo's Act next, please," and the great composer, seemingly unconscious of the incongruity of it all, heaved himself patiently from his chair. I reluctantly arose as well, saying:

"Just one more question, Maestro—what about the women composers of the world?"

"Ah, Madame," exclaimed Signor Leoncavallo, regretfully, "there are no great women composers—your Ethel Smyth stands first, I think."

"Are you a musician?" he inquired, as we were shaking hands. "Do you compose a little, perhaps?"

"Um—m—m—not exactly—at least you wouldn't think so. There is one thing I can compose rather well," I added, somewhat modestly.

"Yes?" urged Signor Leoncavallo, with solicitous interest.

"A lullaby," I said airily. "All women can at some time or other, you know," I added vaguely, as the door closed upon me.

I wonder what the Maestro thought I meant.

POUF! THE GREAT MAESTRO BLEW THE IMAGINARY MASSENET OFF THE PALM OF HIS HAND.